

Natural Planet

Ep. 21 – World's Largest: Unknown Giants of the Deep

Today I shall talk about the depths of our great ocean, a place we know less about than the surface of our moon. The two animals I shall mention may not be the largest in the world, but the largest at the depths that they can live at.

The largest Jellyfish from the darkness at the bottom of the sea is known as the Big Red Jellyfish. This animal is indeed both big and red, this name was thought of as more appropriate than its original name, The Big Ugly Jellyfish. Discovered in 2003, these jellies live at a depth of 600-1,500 metres (2,500 feet) in the depths of the Pacific Ocean and can grow up to 1 metre across. No one has ever caught one, only ever observed them in their eerie stillness from submarines. Because of their rarity and failure to catch one, no one knows what they feed on, how they reproduce or how many actually exist. They have fleshy arms, not the standard tentacles, they don't sting, and unlike most species of jellyfish which have a uniform number of tentacles, some Big Red's have four arms, some have up to seven. It is a mysterious and elusive jellyfish which science still has many questions for.

The second animal I want to talk about is a shark. The Greenland Shark is considered the largest, deepest diving shark. The largest shark in the world, the Whale Sharks dive to 700 metres (2,300 feet) maximum, the Greenland goes to nearly 2,200 metres (7,200 feet). They can grow to six and a half metres (21 feet) in length and can weigh 1000 kilograms. They live in the icy waters of the Arctic and are the longest living of all vertebrates, the oldest reaching almost 400 years old. They can only start to have children at 150 years old, suggesting that they can reach much older ages than just 400 years. They eat anything that floats down to the depths from whales to fish to remains of horses, moose and reindeer (probably human too but no one would go swimming in the freezing waters). Living at such depths in waters below freezing, their flesh contains a high content of urea (the same chemical that gives urine its smell). The local Inuit populations have a legend explaining how a woman washed her hair in urine with a cloth. The cloth blew out to sea and became the first Greenland shark.

I hope you have learned something today about the lesser known big animals of the deep sea. There are plenty of animals yet to discover in the deeps so becoming a deep sea scientist could be a rather good idea.